

A SERMON FROM ST. MARK'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

NEW CANAAN, CONNECTICUT

The Invisible Assembly Line

*Preached by the Reverend Anne F. C. Richards, Senior Assistant
3 Pentecost, June 13, 2010, Luke 7:36-50*

This morning the woman who let her hair down is back with us again! And so we have the story that goes to the very heart of what Jesus was trying to do and is still trying to do. To understand the story, you need to know what has happened right before it. It's a little passage about the Pharisees, about how they didn't like either John the Baptist or Jesus. John was an ascetic and he ate weird food and so they thought he was possessed by the devil, but on the other hand Jesus was not an ascetic and so they called him a drunkard and a gourmand and somebody who didn't know what kind of company to keep. "He's bad news! He's a religious criminal! And here's the proof of it: He eats with tax collectors and prostitutes!" they said. John was offering a baptism of repentance, but the Pharisees refused to be baptized by him because they thought they didn't need it. "We follow the law; we're good people already; we're the righteous ones!" they claimed.

And then, the dinner party. Remember: that who ate what with whom was tremendously important in Jesus' culture. Law-abiding Jews ate only with law-abiding Jews. Because to eat with someone is a very intimate thing, it's a great leveler. Sharing a meal, as you know, signifies at least some degree of mutual acceptance. When you eat with someone, your lives touch.

And so it's unusual that a Pharisee has invited Jesus to eat in his home. But the Pharisee's motive is obvious once you know what the hallmarks of true hospitality were at that time.

When a guest came into the home of a considerate host, the host would offer water to wash his feet; he would kiss the guest as a sign of welcome; and he would offer fragrant oil to soothe the hands and face of a guest who had traveled in the heat and the dust to get to the dinner. These were not special effects; this was just the way hospitality was done – much as you or I might offer to a guest who had traveled to come to our homes the chance to use the bathroom or a glass of ice water or a beer or an iced tea or a comfortable couch to take a load off their feet.

The Pharisee offers none of these things. And so without saying a word he makes it clear that he is not really welcoming Jesus. He is not really receiving him. He wants him there so he can test him, size him up, figure out how to deal with him. But Jesus makes no comment on this. Graciously, he lets the Pharisee receive him on his own terms.

And then our friend comes in. She interrupts the dinner and she stands near Jesus weeping, and then she dries his feet with her hair. It's completely over the top! And she doesn't stop there. As the passage says, she "continues" by kissing Jesus' feet and anointing them with her ointment. Not a word is said. Except inside the Pharisee's head. The Bible doesn't have much subjectivity in it; it doesn't report many people's thoughts (at least not in the course of stories). But here we are given the Pharisee's thoughts. And they are not pretty. He says to himself, "Now I know for sure this

Jesus isn't a prophet, because if he were, he would know that this woman is a sinner. She is unclean, and by touching him she is making him unclean too." And so the Pharisee judges the woman; he reduces her to his own opinion of her. And he judges Jesus. He puts him in a little box. And he puts himself above Jesus in wisdom and moral righteousness. He says to himself, "This guy doesn't know, but I know. **I know.**"

I was thinking about those 2 words over the past couple of days: "I know." Not as in "Now I know how to make cheese grits like Josh does" or "I know the Apostles Creed" or "I know New Canaan has a great public library." Not that kind of "I know." Rather, this: "**I know.**" I know what kind of person my former best friend really is. I know what my boss is really up to. I know my parents never had my best interests at heart. I know that my husband is never going to be really the perfect mate for me, though I suppose I can be sweet enough (most of the time) not to let him know that. (Trust me, he knows.) I know that my ex- wife will never change. I know my kids will never be what I hoped they would be." **I know.**

We live in an unforgiving culture. We live in a culture that tells us that things have to be a certain way and that people have to live up to certain standards in order to be acceptable. It's like there's an invisible assembly line out there. We act like it's not there, but it is. And the message is: **You know** you have to jump on that assembly line if you want your life to turn out OK, if you want your kids to turn out OK. Make sure you all get the credentials and the lifestyle and the home and the right schools.

Well, we all appreciate excellence. We all want to be happy. We're not a bunch of slouches. But the problem with the assembly line is that if you jump on it and stay on it, if you shape your life around messages that come to you externally, your life closes down. Your options get fewer. The standards get so high that we begin to think that somehow we're all going to be perfect someday. The standards get so

high that no marriage, no real relationship made up of two ordinary people with clay feet, can live up to them. The standards get so high that no one does well enough and all of a sudden you can't really receive other people as they really are and you don't let yourself be known as you really are because there's this great unspoken polite conspiracy to stay just separate enough that we don't see each other's sadness and failures and fears, never mind our hopes and dreams. And then people begin to fall by the wayside, causalities of loneliness and depression and isolation and booze and acting-out kids and the other side-effects of the assembly line life. And before you know it, you don't have much of a life at all. You're just stuck with a bunch of credentials in your hand, proofs of your perfect, righteous life. Life itself always booby traps our perfect plans anyway. Some months ago, I was talking with a parishioner about the effects of the recession on life in New Canaan and she was remarking about the number of people who have had to give up their club memberships because they can no longer afford them. She said, "When they run my obituary, it's going to say, 'She was a member of St. Mark's Church and Costco.'" We laughed and laughed. Because even though there is suffering involved in having less, there is also a kind of freedom.

The good thing about sin is that it is a great leveler. The good thing about being a sinner is that it is a great liberator. That's why I love the woman in this story. Because when she heard that Jesus ate with tax collectors and prostitutes, she thought that was good news, not bad news. She saw herself as she really was. She knew she wasn't righteous. She knew she wasn't perfect. She wasn't even trying to pretend she was. She had an open life. And so what did she see in Jesus? She saw that because he hung around with sinners, because he talked with them and ate with them and let them touch his life that meant that God himself wanted to be with sinners, to talk with sinners, to eat with sinners. That that was maybe what God *especially* wanted to do –

because, after all, there's no sense in God wasting his time with people who don't need God. And so the woman realizes that in Jesus, God is actually touching her sin, touching her, healing her, forgiving her. She sees salvation in Jesus. And this releases a great love in her. So she crashes the dinner party to thank him, to let her life touch his life, as he has already touched hers. This is what we all really want. And so you see that the Pharisee is not the real host of the party. It is the woman who is the real host. With her tears, she gives the water to wash his feet. With her kiss, she gives the welcome the Pharisee has withheld. And with her ointment, she gives Jesus the anointing he missed at the front door. Her life was open, so she could receive forgiveness and show love. Or, said another way, her life was open, so she could receive love and show forgiveness. Because forgiveness and love are really the same thing; they're part of the same transaction, the way God comes to us. Forgiveness is the way love ultimately shows itself; and love is the way forgiveness ultimately shows itself. And forgiveness and love are what we all really want.

If you have come to St Mark's for a few months or a few years or many months or many years and you don't really understand why; if you think you don't quite get what the Christian faith is about; if you don't have all your dogma and your doctrine lined up like ducks in a row...but you still keep coming and don't understand exactly what the draw is...I bet it's this: Like the woman, you see salvation in Jesus. Because forgiveness and love are what we all really want. You can find it here. This community will help you find it, and it will help you learn how to give it to other people, which is what being a disciple is all about.

And you begin to learn it at the altar rail, at Holy Communion, that great leveler, when on your knees you share a meal with the people sitting around you this morning and your lives touch for that brief moment as you receive

salvation, as you receive Jesus. And so today, *you* will be Jesus' host.

Life is a lot tougher and a lot more complicated than sometimes we are apt to admit. We need each other. God needs us to need each other, so God can do the saving work he is determined to do. A stray thought came to me this week. It's an old memory about something I read in the paper after the crash of Flight 800 over Lockerbie so many years ago. The paper reported something a teenage boy said after the crash. His cousin, also a teenage boy, his name was Billy, was lost in the crash, and his body was not found, as was the case of so many people in that tragic crash. Their large Southern family was grieving, especially the grandmother who had loved her grandson so much. She wanted his body back so she could bury him. But many days had gone by. And the surviving grandson said to his grandmother in an attempt to console her and perhaps to give her just a bit of hope, "Grandma, maybe Billy is just walking on home."

Well, that's the human condition. We are all just walking on home. Life is beautiful, tragic, and short. We are all going to die. But we are creatures of hope. Hope comes as naturally to us as breathing. So let's give each other a break. Let's open our lives to the saving touch of Jesus and to the people he died to save. So that when we all come to the end of our journeys, when our walk home is ended and we are finally in the arms of the Lord who gave up his righteous reputation so that we could be forgiven, we will rejoice to receive him, as he has always received us, and enjoy forever the heavenly banquet of forgiveness and love he has prepared for those who trust him.